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School Merger Plan Defeated, 1,266-750

This was the headline in the July 1, 1954 edition of the De Pere Journal-Democrat. De Pere's two district school system dates back to 1889 when East and West De Pere joined into one city with the requirement that the school districts remain separate. In June of 1954, after receiving a petition signed by 1,322 citizens, the city council ordered an advisory referendum. The Journal-Democrat reported that "Results of the advisory referendum showed sentiment divided along the middle of the Fox River. The east side polled a comparatively light vote with 604 voting "Yes" and 240 casting "No" ballots. The west side results were heavily weighted in favor of the present two-school district organizations. The vote on the west side was 1,026 "No" to 146 "Yes".

This isn't the first time De Pere citizens proposed combining the two school districts. In January of 1914 a meeting of the two Civic and West Side Advancement associations and east and west side school boards met to consider the question of joining school districts. One hundred two years ago in the March 1915 edition of the Journal-Democrat an editorial comment encouraged consolidation; "De Pere and West De Pere will be wedded 25 years tomorrow. Let us hope that when we celebrate our golden wedding all factional feeling and strife between east and west side will be wiped out. And one school system for the two sides of the river would help materially to this end". In March of 1915 members of the De Pere and West De Pere school boards signed a request asking the city council to consolidate the districts "in the interest of economy and efficiency". On January 8, 1924 a proposed school consolidation referendum was held. The referendum was defeated with 483 "Yes" votes and 545 "No" votes.

Even with the referendum defeat in 1924, discussions regarding consolidation continued. In July of 1967 another referendum was held. Members of the "Yes" committee cited advantages of economy, efficiency, flexible planning and increased vocational training. "No" committee members said "bigness does not mean progress" and that the two districts operate their schools "economically and efficiently". The referendum was defeated 916 to 1228.

As it has over the last 125 years and as recently as 1986, the topic of consolidating the two school districts continues to be discussed in De Pere.

1967: Consolidation discussed

Council To Hold Its Last Meeting On This Evening

Question of Consolidating De Pere School Districts Will Be Discussed Again.

Date: 03/15/1915 Press Gazette

The present city council will hold its last meeting this evening, and timing the matters to be discussed is the feasibility of uniting the two school districts and consolidating the classes. All unfinished business will be disposed of as far as possible, and the decks left clear for the incoming council.

In regard to the school question, there is a wide difference in opinion among aldermen and citizens. It is expected that some lively discussion will take place, as it is understood the opposition is strong on the part of a few.

The plan is to unite the classes of the city schools from the Seventh grade to the Senior year inclusive. The Seventh, Eighth, and Sophomore classes would be taught in one of the present high school buildings, and the Sophomore, Junior and Senior classes in the other. It offers a very practical way to practice economy.

Increase efficiency, and introduce more courses, at a less expense than is being taken now.

According to information that has been gathered from members of the school board and others, who have studied the plan, the following can be said. The standard of education prescribed by the state has been raising continually, and the consequence has been, that the cost of maintaining the local schools has been increasing year after year. Comparing this city with others of its size. De Pere is paying proportionately too much money for the maintaining of its educational institutions. It is supporting two buildings, two corps of teachers, and two sets of things while other cities support but one.

By uniting the classes, which in many instances are small and therefore would be easily accomplished, the expenses would be diminished greatly. Then, with this decrease, it would be justifiable to employ a corps of more efficient teachers, and also introduce more and modern courses. In short, better schools could be had and a saving in taxes made.

The matter is deserving of much consideration and careful action, as it concerns a matter of expense and one of training which cannot be estimated in dollars and cents.

Council Will Get School Merger Petition Tuesday

Aim Is Referendum Vote On Question

Signature Campaign Underway This Week

Date: 05/06/1954 De Pere Journal Democrat

Petitions bearing the names of several hundred De Pere residents asking for a city-wide referendum on the question of consolidation of the two school systems in the city will be presented to Mayor E. A. Seymour and the city council at the regular May meeting next Tuesday at city hall, according to plans.

The petitions are available this week at city hall and in stores and offices throughout the city. The petition is being sponsored by the citizens' committee on school re-organization, which presented both majority and minority reports last November after a six month study of school district organization here.

Wording Of Petition

This is the wording of the petition: "To the honorable mayor and common council of the city of De Pere: We the undersigned, being electors of the city of De Pere and residing on the city of De Pere, hereby petition you under chapter 40.06, subsection 1, Wisconsin laws of 1958 (formerly chapter 40.30, laws of 1951) and request that you by your order consolidate the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th wards of the city of De Pere into one school district under the city school plan so that the city thereafter be one school district."

Members of the committee emphasized that signing of the petition does not necessarily mean that the signer favors school consolidation. Purpose of the petition, they pointed out, is to bring about a city-wide referendum on the school question.

According to the state statutes, the council shall meet within 30 days following the filing of the petition and call a public hearing. If the council refuses to issue the consolidation order, an appeal can be made to the state superintendent of public instruction within 90 days of the filing date.

Early Referendum Seen

Following the council order creating the single district, 10 percent of the electors or 500, which-ever is smaller, can file a petition requesting a referendum election on the question.

Following the expected filing of the petition Tuesday, the actual special referendum election will be held held within a few months, it was indicated.

Members of the citizens' committee are Donald Butz, Mrs. William S. Klaus, Martin Cain, Robert Berg, James Hughes, Ray Gervers, and Arthur Beecher. Walter Cloud Jr., who had served as chairman of the committee is no longer a member since his appointment as a member of the East De Pere school board.

De Pere's school situation, two separate school districts within one city, is unique in the state of Wisconsin. The situation dates back to the incorporation of the city in 1989 with the uniting of the villages of De Pere and West De Pere.

Under the city's charter ordinance granted by the state legislature, the east side was termed city school district and the west side a common school district. In a consolidation referendum in 1924, a merger of the districts was defeated, 545, 465.

Council Asks Referendum Petition On School Issue

Merger Requests Signed by 1,013

Alternate Plan And Special Meet Proposed

Date: 05/20/1954 De Pere Journal Democrat

Mayor E. A. Seymour and the city council at the regular May meeting Tuesday night graciously but firmly declined to enact an ordinance uniting De Pere's two school districts under one city-wide school district. The proposal was presented to the council in petition from with 1,013 signatures, approximately one-fourth of the total number of registered voters in the city.

The council voted to accept the petition forms and place them on file. Then, after a brief recess, members of the council presented an alternative suggestion in the form of a resolution.

The resolution underlines the importance of the consolidation question and asks that citizens of the city petition the mayor and council for a special city-wide referendum election.

Alternate Resolution

This is the wording of the resolution, introduced by the council as a whole recommended by the mayor:

"To the Citizens of the city of De Pere -- Due to the fact that your mayor and common council believe that the question of consolidating school district No. 1 and school district No. 2 of the city of De Pere is of such importance that every qualified voter of the city should be given the opportunity of voting on the question by means of a referendum. Therefore, be it resolved by the mayor and common council of the city of De Pere that it is their desire that the city of De Pere petition the mayor and common council as soon as possible for a referendum in the matter of consolidating the two school districts of the city of De Pere."

May 15, 1963

An historic move for consolidation of schools at De Pere was initiated Tuesday night (May 14th) by the De Pere City Council.

By unanimous vote, aldermen approved a resolution calling upon the Brown County School Committee to supervise creation of a single city school system to replace existing Dist. No. 1, a city school system on the east side of the Fox River, and Joint Dist. No. 2, a common school district centered in West De Pere.

The resolution is based on a petition signed by eight aldermen and Mayor William Gross.

School Dist. No. 1 is comprised of East De Pere and the Towns of Bellevue, De Pere, Rockland, Glenmore, Morrison and Wrightstown. Common School Dist. No. 2 is made up of West De Pere, the Towns of Lawrence and Hobart in Brown County and the Town of Oneida in Outagamie County.

De Pere studying school merger

Author: Karll Van Boxel -Press-Gazette

Date: 11/8/1985

A target date of May 1986 has been set to present the final study report to the two De Pere school districts on possible consolidation.

Department of Public Instruction consultant Keith Martin Thursday met with community representatives to discuss an impact study dealing with the pros and cons of consolidation.

The group will meet again at 7:30 p-m. Jan. 9 in West De Pere to discuss demographics and enrollment projections. A January date also will be selected for a tour of all school buildings.

"This is preliminary at best," said De Pere District Administrator Richard Yenchesky. "Certainly it should not be construed as step one of consolidation."

The service of the DPI consultant is provided through tax dollars. Martin will gather information from the representatives- who attended the meeting and complete a draft of the report, including recommendations, by early April.

"My role is strictly as an adviser — a consultant." said Martin. "The process begins and ends with the two boards of education."

Calling the districts "atypical." Martin said De Pere is the only city in Wisconsin with two school districts.

Those districts compose a wide geographical area and include the city of De Pere, plus a portion of the village of Ashwaubenon and the towns of Hobart, Lawrence and Oneida in the West De Pere District.

The De Pere District includes the east side of the city of De Pere along with portions of the towns of Bellevue, De Pere, Glenmore, Morrison, Rockland and Wrightstown.

The study will look at the total community, not just what effect a merger would have on the school districts.

Martin emphasized that what is studied should come from the representatives at the meeting. They also will act as liaisons with their town boards, city council, school boards or education associations.

The three components of the study will be educational, financial and facility implications, now and in the future.

For starters, the study will include costs — tax levy, cost per student, what will happen with state aids in the event of a merger, fund equity, long term indebtedness, fixed assets; enrollment projections including class sizes; analysis of professional staff; pupil transportation; facilities; and educational practices.

Martin said the school boards have the authority to call for a referendum to decide the consolidation issue or the voters may petition for it.

If a referendum would support a merger, the boards then would have to reorganize within seven days. The only items they then could decide would be the name of the new district, the type of district it will be — unified or common, grades taught, number of members on the school board, how the board will be elected, date of the election, time and place of the annual meet-in or budget hearing, and the date of the reorganization.

Whenever two districts merge, all assets and liabilities go to the new district. That includes staff contracts and union agreements, Martin said.

De Pere districts separated by river, history

Author: Beth Gorczyca - Green Bay Press Gazette

Date: May 20, 1999

Some eye combining schools

DE PERE - It's been 109 years since two municipalities separated by the Fox River became one - the city of De Pere. More than a century later, the river and the lingering history of that separation continue to divide the city's school districts.

De Pere is the only city in the state with two separate school districts. However, as both school districts consider referendums for new buildings this year, some residents question whether it would be cheaper for taxpayers and better for students if the two were to become one.

"I think they should merge," De Pere resident Pat Cochran said. She thinks merging would be cheaper and have fewer administrators.

However, experts interviewed by the Press-Gazette said that merging may not be in the best interest of the city, the districts or their taxpayers. The benefits of merging may not outweigh the costs associated with the

plan or the impact on students and the communities.

"It's my hypothesis that it wouldn't be a benefit to merge," said Bambi Statz, an independent consultant from Mount Horeb who helps school districts decide whether they should merge.

Right now both school districts offer the same basic curriculum and educational services, tax residents at almost identical rates, and face similar building and space needs.

De Pere districts similar

That's not the case for most school districts that consider merging, Statz said. She said there is often a disparity between the two school districts that makes it advantageous for them to merge. Many times, smaller school districts will merge with larger ones to improve the educational offerings for students, or a higher-taxed district will merge with a lower-taxed district.

The last school districts to merge in Wisconsin were Arkansaw and Durand in 1992 and Bloomington and West Grant in 1995. In the 1992 merger, a smaller school district with a spacious new high school and high taxes merged with a bigger district facing a space crunch. In the 1995 merger, both districts faced shrinking enrollment and opted to join together rather than see their taxes skyrocket.

But in De Pere's school districts, neither of those situations is true. Both districts have tax rates at about \$10.41 per \$1,000 of equalized value, both have relatively low debt, and both are experiencing enrollment increases.

In fact, both districts plan to pursue building projects this year. On Tuesday, the De Pere School District will ask voters to approve a \$20 million building project. The West De Pere School District is gearing up for a \$125 million referendum this fall.

"Even if we merged together, we'd still need to pursue building projects on both sides," said West De Pere Superintendent Lanny Tibaldo.

Cost efficient

Tibaldo also said merging the two districts would not necessarily decrease operational costs. Todd Berry, president of the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, said both districts appear to run frugally and spend either at or below the state average on their students.

"They don't appear to have a lot of fat," Berry said.

In addition, De Pere Superintendent Richard Yenchesky said that while a merged district would have one fewer superintendent and business manager, it could have more mid-level administrators and the same amount of buildings to maintain.

If the district opted to combine schools and close a few buildings, transportation would become an issue. West De Pere serves students from De Pere, Lawrence, Hobart, Ashwaubenon and Oneida. De Pere serves students from De Pere, Bellevue, Glenmore, Ledgeview, Rockland and Morrison.

"No matter where you put a school, kids would be on the bus for more than an hour," said Kevin Hanson, business manager and transportation manager for West De Pere schools. "I already have kids riding almost an hour to get from Outagamie County to the high school."

Add in having to cross the river, and the bus rides could get even longer.

"Even if we put in three crossings over the river, it wouldn't be enough," Hanson said. "The river is like a mountain."

River still a barrier

Cochran acknowledges the problem the river poses but said other districts, such as Green Bay, are bisected by a river and still work fine. She said it's the history of the river, not its physical presence, that keeps the districts separate.

"There's a 300-foot wall in the middle of that bridge," she said. "People still consider the west side to be where all the workers live and the east side to be where all the bosses live. It's not that way anymore, but that's how people think. Never the two shall meet."

De Pere schools should unite

Date: Nov 18, 2004

Opinion - Green Bay Press Gazette

Both the De Pere and West De Pere school districts are tentatively looking at referendums in support of new elementary schools in November 2005. De Pere voters defeated a referendum earlier this month and the School Board is back to revising its plans to find ways to ease crowding.

We urge the two districts to revisit the issue of consolidation. De Pere is the only city in the state with two separate school districts. The Fox River has always been a powerful divider in the communities it runs through, but it's time to cross it and work together in the interest of saving taxpayers' money and continuing to provide excellent curriculum.

Consolidation is a tough argument to make in these districts with their long history of being divided. Right now, both school districts offer the same basic curriculum and educational services, tax residents at almost identical rates and face similar building and space needs.

With home building booming in both districts, administrators have been able to hold the line on tax rates, but that can't last forever.

Most school district mergers have been prompted when a smaller district merges with a larger one to improve the educational offerings for students, or a higher-taxed district will merge with a lower-taxed district. The last school mergers in Wisconsin were Arkansaw and Durand in 1992 and Bloomington and West Grant in 1995. In the 1992 merger, a smaller school district with a spacious new high school and high taxes merged with a bigger district facing a space crunch. In the 1995 merger, both districts faced shrinking enrollment and opted to join together rather than see their taxes skyrocket.

In De Pere, neither of these scenarios is at work. Both have growing enrollments. Figures for De Pere show that the elementary schools will exceed their combined capacities of 1,200 students by about 100 students next year. In West De Pere, elementary enrollment -- including preschoolers -- is at 768, just 32 shy of Westwood's capacity of 800. Both districts are looking at buying property for new elementary schools before they bring the matter to voters next year.

As the districts grapple with the problems of crowding, we urge them to discuss consolidation as they seek a

solution.

School division doesn't add up for some

Author: Mike Hoeft - Green Bay Press Gazette

Date: Jan 30, 2006

Source: Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance

* Statewide K-12 average expense: \$8,734 per pupil. Expenses per pupil exclude transportation, debt service, capital expansion and nonprogram costs.

DE PERE -- With De Pere's two school districts both looking to build new elementary schools to accommodate growth, some residents are again asking why the city remains divided into separate public school systems.

"It's a waste of money," said De Pere resident Paul Wozniak. Consolidating the two districts -- De Pere and West De Pere -- would save taxpayers money because duplicated programs and administrative and supply costs could be reduced, he said.

But others disagree, saying that consolidation usually works best if one district is much smaller or is experiencing decreases -- not gains -- in enrollment.

Voters in the De Pere district in November approved a \$21 million expansion plan to add an elementary school near Rockland Road and upgrade the high school and middle school to accommodate growth. Capacity will be reached by the 2007-08 school year with 3,767 students and enrollment is expected to climb to more than 4,000 by 2010-11.

In West De Pere, meanwhile, voters will decide this spring whether to build an elementary school to accommodate growth. Enrollment is expected to climb from 2,200 currently to more than 2,600 by 2010-11.

Opponents of consolidation say it could increase operational costs and threaten community identity and traditions.

Just as the Fox River acts as a divider between the east and west sides of De Pere, Wozniak said parochial attitudes work as a barrier to change.

"Why is this? No one wants to step on another's turf," he said.

"I've got to think it would save money," Alderman Mike Fleck said about consolidation.

Merger efforts failed

The unusual situation resulted in De Pere after the east and west sides of the city merged in 1890, with the school systems staying separate.

Richard Peters of De Pere, who favors consolidation, said school district mergers have been attempted in citywide referendums over the past 50 years, but have failed.

Former De Pere mayor Robert DeGroot, a retired math teacher at West De Pere High School, said that while consolidation referendums were approved by most people in urban De Pere, they were defeated because they

lacked approval by all townships that are part of the school districts.

"I don't know if it would be progress to have one school system," DeGroot said. There are also the rivalry and the tax base to consider, he said.

Tax base

Public schools make up 48 percent of a resident's property tax bill. So a resident in west De Pere pays a different tax rate than one in east De Pere. The tax rates generally have been lower on the west side in recent years. Now with both districts looking at school expansion, tax rates are likely to go up in both districts.

The mill rate currently is \$18.35 per \$1,000 of property value on the west side and \$19.33 per \$1,000 on the east side, said De Pere Clerk-Treasurer David Minten.

De Pere homeowner Ray Thao, whose children attend West De Pere schools, said he always wondered why there were two districts.

"I'd like to know," Thao said. "But I don't mind the way it is. Cheaper is OK."

Clayton Smits, who taught math for 34 years at De Pere High School, said he doesn't think consolidation would save much money on administration costs.

While a merged district would have just one superintendent, it might require hiring more assistant superintendents, he said.

"I would be opposed to consolidation because it's that much harder to deal with," Smits said. "There are real benefits in smaller districts."

Wouldn't solve crowding

Ben Villarruel, superintendent of De Pere School District, said consolidation might have merit at some point, but it wouldn't be the answer to current crowding because of enrollment growth.

Before the Nov. 8 referendum, some residents asked if merging with the West De Pere School District would help accommodate the new growth. Villarruel said neither school district would be able to absorb the enrollment growth without expanding their facilities.

Both districts strive to share programming and cut costs whenever possible, Villarruel said.

"The districts share an English language learner teacher and are talking about at-risk program sharing," he said. "We also may look at sharing some extracurricular programs."

Lanny Tibaldo, superintendent of the West De Pere School District, said cooperation between the districts is exceptional.

"Any time we can work together for the kids, we do it," Tibaldo said. "The advantage now is that a parent can call and talk to the superintendent. That probably wouldn't happen if the districts combined."

A combined district would be about 5,700 students, he said.

Tibaldo said the question on consolidation is: What would be the educational advantage to the student?

If one district was too small to provide students with Spanish 4, advanced calculus or an athletic team, consolidation would make sense.

"But neither district is in that position. Both are vibrant, growing districts. I don't see a positive impact for children," Tibaldo said.

Cost cutting

Wozniak said consolidation is an option worth considering .

"We need to look at the number of levels of local government. The enormous layers are very costly," he said.

Across Wisconsin, school districts have found creative ways to share costs.

In West Bend, for example, East and West high schools share the same building complex.

Several small school districts share superintendents. Lake Country and Stone Bank school districts in Waukesha County share one superintendent. The Maple Dale-Indian Hill and Glendale-River Hills school districts in Milwaukee County also share a superintendent, as do the Lake Geneva-Genoa City Union High School and Lake Geneva Joint 1 school districts in Walworth County.

But those districts are much smaller than De Pere and West De Pere, a taxpayers group points out.

Dale Knapp, research director for the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, said De Pere and West De Pere districts spend per pupil a little below the statewide average.

Knapp said a study several years ago showed the most efficient size for a school district was between 2,500 and 3,500 students.

"A lot of factors go into whether consolidation makes sense. For districts between 300 and 500 students consolidation certainly would spread out fixed costs," Knapp said.

But in bigger districts that are experiencing growth, "I'm not sure merging is going to have a very big effect," he said.

State sharing

Tony Evers, deputy state superintendent for the Department of Public Instruction, said the state always encourages districts to share costs regardless of tight times.

To that end, the state has a Cooperative Educational Service Agency network that works in partnership with school districts to facilitate change and continuous improvement.

Northeastern Wisconsin is part of CESA 7 district office. The state does not get involved in school boundary or consolidation issues.

"Our goal is to encourage efficiencies and make sure kids get a quality education," Evers said.

Source: League of Women Voters of Greater Green Bay, The De Pere Schools, 1979

History of separation

Schools have existed in De Pere since the early nineteenth century.

In 1847, the town of De Pere (east De Pere) organized its school district and school was held in the courthouse. With statehood in 1848, Wisconsin created a state school fund. The West De Pere School District was organized in that year.

During the industrial boom of the 1870s, both school systems expanded. In 1877 a high school was started in West De Pere, and in 1878 a high school opened in east De Pere.

The tradition of two separate school districts is a long one. In 1890, the city of West De Pere was annexed to the city of De Pere, but the two districts remained separate.

Divided schools

De Pere is not the only city in the state to have separate school systems:

- * Fitchburg in Dane County is split into three school districts.
- * Parts of the cities of Franklin and Greenfield in southwestern Milwaukee County are in separate school districts.
- * Parts of Suamico, Oconto County and Shawano County are in the Pulaski School District.

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In fact, both districts plan to pursue building projects this year. On Tuesday, the De Pere School District will ask voters to approve a \$20 million building project. The West De Pere School District is gearing up for a \$25 million referendum this fall.

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Area school districts to share administrator - De Pere next?

From: <http://www.fox11online.com>

Date: 4/5/13

Area school districts to share administrator

Time to be split 60-40

GOODMAN - Two Northeast Wisconsin school districts have found a unique way to save money: share an administrator.

The Florence County School District and the Goodman-Armstrong Creek School District will share Ben Niehaus as their administrator. Niehaus is currently Goodman-Armstrong Creek's superintendent and principal.

Last week, both districts approved a measure to hire Niehaus as the next administrator for both districts. The Florence County School District's current administrator is leaving.

This isn't the first time the Florence County School District has tried to find ways to deal with a tight budget. Eight years ago, the district considered closing its doors for good.

The move will save both districts tens of thousands of dollars, according to school board members.

The districts are adjacent to each other, but the central offices are about 30 miles apart.

"I have a philosophy: if we have to make these tough decisions, let's make them as far from the classroom as possible," explained Niehaus. "In public education, we're being asked to do a lot more, as we have to find creative and unique ways to meet the demands that are placed upon us and I think this is one way."

Starting in July, Niehaus will spend three days a week running the Florence District and two days a week at the smaller Goodman-Armstrong Creek School District.

Florence will pay 65 percent of the salary, while Goodman-Armstrong Creek will cover the rest.

It's estimated the Goodman-Armstrong Creek School District will save around \$39,000 a year and the Florence County School District is expected to see a \$30,000 a year savings.

"Do you think this could be too much of a workload for one person? Do you think performance will suffer? I doubt it," answered Florence County School Board President Jim Churchill. "(Of) course he's dealing with two different school boards, and two different communities, two different sets of staff, but I think he'll be able to handle that."

Churchill says he thinks the arrangement will work, especially since Niehaus already wears two hats. He says

other area districts have seen success with this method as well.

"White Lake/Elcho has been doing this for five years," Churchill said. "So we realized this can work. And I know it's working in other places in the state I believe."

The current agreement is for one year. Both sides say if all goes well, it may be a permanent move.

Niehaus says Goodman-Armstrong Creek has found someone to fill the principal position.